A THESIS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

Making Sense of Loss and Belongingness:

Korean Transracial Adoptees' Journey from Europe to Korea

유럽에서 한국으로의 여정을 통해 본 입양아들의 상실감과 소속감에 대한 이야기

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FEBRUARY 2016

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이 논문을 생활과학석사 학위논문으로 제출함

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2016년 2월

위원장 _____(인)

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ABSTRACT

From the year 1953 until today an estimated number of 200,000 Korean born children were adopted into foreign countries. There are studies focusing on Korean adoptees growing up in the USA, as the majority of those children were adopted by American families. However, there is a lack of research focusing on Korean transracial adoptees who grew up in European countries. This research aims to highlight Korean transracial adoptees' journey from Europe to Korea. To give a deeper insight in Korean adoptees' experiences growing up in a European country and coming back to Korea, the following research questions emerged.

1) How do Korean transracial adoptees make sense of who they are in their journey from Europe to Korea?
2) How do Korean transracial adoptees make sense of loss from childhood to adulthood?
3) How do Korean transracial adoptees perceive the sense of lack of belongingness in constructing their identity?

To answer these questions in-depth interviews were conducted with 42 open-ended questions focusing on their family life, their school experience, their search for their birth family, and their identity development throughout their life span. Three participants narrated their life stories in two interview sessions. After transcribing the interviews, a cross-case analysis was

conducted and highlighted unique and common experiences among the three participants. The major themes of their journey from Europe to Korea were their ongoing experience of loss and their lack of sense of belongingness. This study showed that the sense of loss and the lack of belongingness changed over time. Participants showed to be active agents in their journey from Europe to Korea. Indeed, through their life span, they constantly ameliorate their situation and adapt to new arising challenges.

Keyword: Korean transracial adoptees, journey from Europe to Korea, sense of loss, sense of belongingness, constructing identity

Student Number: 2013-23928

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I. INTRODUCTION

The wish to become a parent and to raise a child of one's own is very common all over the world. Unfortunately, not every couple has the ability to give birth to a biological child, which leads many couples to the option of adopting a child. In-country adoption is difficult in American and European countries, due to the fact that there are more couples searching for an adoptive child than parents releasing their child for adoption (Kim, 2010). Therefore, many couples decide to adopt children internationally. However, international adoption received a lot of criticisms due to the negative impact it may have on the adoptees development.

Bartholet (2007) describes international adoption as transfer of children for parenting from one nation to another nation. International adoption is full of differences and controversies. Adoptee and his or her adoptive parents differ not just biologically, but also in their economic class, race, ethnic and cultural heritage, and nationality. In most cases, relatively privileged American or European couples adopt a child from a family which has not the same socioeconomic resources. Unlike the case of in-country adoption, this form of adoption is much complex.

These differences may challenge the adoptees' identity development and lead to adverse outcomes among adopted people. That is the reason why transracial adoption was heavily criticized. The Association of Black Social

Workers (1972) emphasized that Non-African-American parents were not able to provide the necessary for racial socialization to their transracial adopted child. Therefore, a big amount of research focusing on how transracial adoptive parents culturally socialize their children emerged (Lee & Quintana, 2005; Johnston, Swim, Saltsman, Deater-Deckard, & Petrill, 2007; Mohanty, Keokse, & Sales, 2008). These studies were focusing on transracial adoptees' ethnic identity development, but they lack information about the complex context and the lifelong process transracial adoption involves. Therefore, there needs to be more research focusing on the transracial adoptees' perception and their way of defining their experience. By listening to transracial adoptees' life stories, we can get a deeper understanding of their journey. The following poem written by Korean transracial adoptees assembled by Getman (2007), illustrates the feelings Korean adoptees may experience in their first visit back to their birth country.

The Journey

The plane touched down in the Land of the Morning Calm

With anticipation the young lady left the plane feeling anything, but calm

The sights and smells powerful her head was reeling from all this

The people looked like her, is this possible, could it be, what place was this

Everywhere she went she felt that she belonged, but how could this be for

She could not remember visiting this place before

Young lady this is the place of your birth, this is your motherland

You see it was 21 years ago that you left, you have been here before

A peaceful calm came over her for she knew she had come home

To the place where her life had started, just 21 years ago (Getman, 2007)

1. Research Purpose

This research aims to focus on the life experience Korean transracial adoptees have in their journey from Europe to Korea. A major focus will be given on Korean transracial adoptees' identity development throughout their life span. A life span perspective is necessary to show the process of adaptation and the changes from childhood, to adulthood, through adolescence. Previous research on adoptees' life stories mainly focused on Korean adoptees growing up in the USA (Brian, 2012 & Ahn-Redding & Simon, 2007). However, there are around 40'000 Korean adoptees growing up in European countries and their experience may differ from Korean children adopted into the United States. Indeed, more research focusing on Korean transracial adoptees growing up in European countries is needed. Passmore (2007) stated that adoptees do not represent a homogenous group. Research showed that there are differences among adoptees who actively search for their birth family and the ones not searching. Passmore and her colleagues (2005) studied adoptees and non-adoptees by comparing their self-esteem, parental bonding, and identity style. Among non-adoptees, adoptees searching for their birth parents, and adoptees not searching for their birth parents, the

results indicated statistical significant differences only between the non-adoptees and the adoptees reunited with their birth parents. However, the differences between the adoptee who are not searching for their birth parents and the non-adoptee groups were not statistically significant (Passmore, Fogarty, Bourke, & Baker-Evans, 2005). There is a big lack of knowledge to explain the reasons of the differences among those two adoptee groups. That is why this research aims to give its major focus to Korean transracial adoptees who grew up in a European country and who decided to come back to Korea in order to learn more about their biological background. The main purpose is to highlight their journey from Europe to Korea by listening to their life stories and respecting their individual reflections and perceptions.

2. Research Questions

This study aims to look at the life experiences Korean adoptees gain by growing up in a European country. To get a deeper insight in transracial adoptees' journey from Europe to Korea, the following research questions emerged.

1) How do Korean transracial adoptees make sense of who they are in their journey from Europe to Korea?
2) How do Korean transracial adoptees make sense of loss from childhood to adulthood?
3) How do Korean transracial adoptees perceive the sense of lack of

belongingness in constructing their identity?

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURES AND RELATED RESEARCH

In the following part, existing research on Korean transracial adoption is reviewed, starting with the history of Korean transracial adoption, discussing how Korean transracial adoption started and how it evolved over time. In a second part, the identity development of Korean transracial adoptees is emphasized, respecting a life span perspective. In another part, studies regarding adoptees' sense of belonging will be reviewed. And lastly, adoptees' dealing with uncertainty and their experience of loss will be discussed.

1. Korean Transracial Adoption

1) Background of Korean Transracial Adoption

International adoption in South Korean dates back into the period of Korean War, where an Oregon farmer started to rescue war orphans. In the year 1953, the US congress passed the Refugee Relief Act which allowed Korean War orphans or Amerasian children to be adopted into American families. Most of these Korean children were adopted into American families, while a small number was also adopted into other Western countries. Even after the Korean War, the number of internationally adopted children, into Western countries, continued to increase (Kim, 1995).

Kim (2010) mentioned that between the years 1953-2011 165,719 South Korean children were adopted into transracial families. Solely in the years between 1970 and 1980, 112,546 children were sent to Western countries for adoption. The principal reason of the high number of South Korean international adoption in the years 1950-1960 was due to the orphans after the Korean War. Nevertheless, during the years 1970-1980 single mothers' abandonment showed to be the main reason. Adoption among relatives used to be much more common in South Korea due to cultural values; however, the social and economic burden during this period of industrialization caused the raising cases of international adoption. On the other side, the low number of Caucasian children searching for an adoptive family led many Western couples to adopt children internationally. Additionally, the stereotypic perception of Asian children as quiet, trouble-free, responsible and achieving may also have supported the interracial adoption of Korean children into western countries (Kim, 1995). In the year of the Seoul International Olympics 1988, the facets of international adoption changed, due to an article in the New York Times with the title "Babies for Export". This article caused guilt feelings among the Korean society and led to changes in the process of international adoption. Thenceforth, the Korean government systematically discouraged international adoption (Kim, 1995). Since the Korean War in the 1950's an estimated number of 200,000 children from South Korea were adopted into Western homes in North America, Europe and Australia.

Nowadays, South Korea sends every year around 900-1,000 abandoned or orphaned children into Western countries (Kim, 2010). The USA is the country which adopted the highest number of Korean adoptees (111,574), France is the second most receiving country (11,183) followed by Sweden (9,515), Denmark (9,355), Norway (6,411), Netherlands (4,099) and Switzerland (1,111).

2) Reasons for International Adoption

Hollingsworth (1997) described three different reasons why Western countries adopt children from Asian or African countries. First, a frequent reason is the small number of healthy Caucasian children, who are available for adoption. A second reason is the desire of Caucasian couples to offer a permanent home and family to children who might otherwise grow up in foster care. And the third reason is described as the desire of Western families to create a multicultural family as an intervention against racism. In the year 2012, 2,697 children of Chinese origin and 627 Korean children were adopted into American homes. Nowadays, children coming from China, Russia and Korea represented the highest rates among international adoption into the USA (US Department of State, 2013).

3) Korean Transracial Adoptees in European Countries

By summing the cases of Korean adoption in France, Sweden, Denmark,

Norway, Netherlands and Switzerland we reach a number of 40,000. Among European countries, France was the most receiving country of Korean children. International adoption in France started in the 1960's. The main purpose of international adoption in France was to support children living in difficult conditions in their country by providing them a stable home. International adoption of Korean children in France has been decreasing drastically since the last years (Li, 2014). A Swiss newspaper article relates that even though South Korea faced an economic development, still about 1,000 Korean children are sent oversea every year. International adoption is continuing, despite the economic development of South Korea. Some of the reasons could be the pressure of the Korean society towards single mothers (Seelman, 2011). A German newspaper article highlights the journey of two Korean born adults who grew up in Germany and the USA to Korea (Schulz, 2009). There is very little research regarding the life experience of Korean born children, who grew up in European countries.

2. Korean Transracial Adoptees' Identity Development from a Life Span Perspective

There is a big amount of research focusing on transracial adoptees identity development by measuring their ethnic and racial identity (Huh & Reid, 2000; Hollingsworth, 1997). Other studies focused on the effects of adoptive

parents' cultural socialization practices and their influences on the transracial adoptees' well-being (Yoon, 2008; Mohanty, Koekse & Sales, 2008; Johnston, Swim, Saltsman, Deater,-Deckard & Petril, 2007). Quantitative research about the ethnic identity development of transracial adoptees may give us an insight in the adoptees' ethnic identity development at one single moment of their life, but might not give us knowledge about their individual context. There are multiple ways to look at identity development; research can study identity development among children, teenagers, or young adults. This research aims to look at the identity development of Korean transracially adopted people, respecting a life span perspective. This approach permits to highlight changes in the identity development from childhood to adulthood. The following review of related research gives a deeper insight in the construction of identity as a lifelong process. The experience of loss and the lack of sense of belongingness among Korean transracial adoptees will be discussed and their importance in the identity development will be highlighted.

The major question surrounding identity development is. "Who am I?" By asking ourselves this kind of question, we would think about our personal characteristics, important values, religious believes, and political attitudes we value. Erikson (1963) mentioned that even though identity development starts in infancy, the most important period arises in adolescence. Adolescents are trying to develop a more firm and coherent sense of who they are, and where they fit in the society. Marcia (1980) described four different statuses in

identity development. *Identity diffusion* status; includes people, who do not yet have thought a lot about their sense of self and their place in the society. *Foreclosure* status; describes people who have committed a sense of self, but without going through a crisis. *Moratorium* status, defines people who are in the identity crisis, actively asking and searching for a firmer sense of self. And lastly *identity achievement* status; describing people, who developed a firm sense of self and the ability to make personal commitments about goals, believes, and values.

Crocetti, Rubini, Luyckx & Meeus (2008) expanded the identity status model of Marcia by adding a fifth status called searching moratorium. Compared to the well-known moratorium status described by Marcia (1980) illustrating the identity crisis, the searching moratorium status defines adolescents or young adults, who have developed firm sense of self, but they were no longer satisfied with that commitment (Crocetti et al., 2008). Individuals in the searching moratorium status rethink their commitment and try to find alternatives, which may suit them better. Additionally to the five statuses in individuals identity development, Crocetti and colleagues described three dimensions; commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitment (Crocetti, Scrignaro, Sica, & Margin, 2011; Crocetti et al., 2008; & Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2007). *Commitment* describes the choice individuals made concerning important areas in their identity and the degree to which they feel confident about it. *In-depth*

exploration illustrades the extend to which individuals actively rethink their commitment , reflect their choices, and their gathering of new information. And lastly *reconsideration of commitment* refers to the comparison of the actual commitment and possible alternative commitments, which may suit better to the actual circumstances and individuals efforts to adapt and rethink their made choices (Crocetti, et al., 2008). This expanded model of identity development illustrates the lifelong process of idenity development. Even once a firm and coherent sense of self is achieved, people may start to rethink and readapt their commitment with more matching alternatives. That is why individuals identity development should be seen in a life span perspective.

Cooley (1902) highlighted in his concept of the Looking-Glass Self, that the development of one's identity emerges as a result of interaction with other people. How other people encounter us and react to us as a person, will impact the way we identify ourselves. Also Goethe, one of the most famous authors from Germany, stated that people get a deeper understanding of themselves only through interactions with other people and their experience during their life.

> *Der Mensch erkennt sich nur im Menschen, nur*
>
> *Das Leben lehret jedem was er sey. (Goethe, 1998)*

The identity development of Korean transracial adoptees may be particularly challenging given the unique context of growing up with racial distinct appearances in a predominately uniform society. How peers react to

the different appearances transracial adoptees have, may impact the way adoptees construct a sense of self. Unique challenges of adoptees identity development are also described in the following quote of the Evan B. Donaldson Institute study written by McGinnis, Livingston Smith, Scott & Howard (2009).

All human beings, as they develop, seek to understand who they are and what their place is in the world. Adopted individuals have the additional overlay of discerning why they are not with the parents who created them and what relevance this has for their own identities. Those adopted across race and culture also face the reality of integrating racial/ethnic identity without input from a family with this lived experience (McGinnis et al., 2009, p. 12).

Transracial adoptees face unique challenges in their identity development compared to their non-adopted peers. As described in the previous quote, adoptees do not know where they really come from and why their biological parents decided to release them for adoption. Indeed, that information may be important in order to develop a healthy sense of self. Additionally, Korean transracial adoptees grow up in an environment and in a family, who does not belong to the same racial group. This difference may lead to further complications in the development of their identity.

The study written by McGinnis and others (2009) about Korean transracial adoptees' identity development showed that the salience of their racial/ethnic identity is becoming more relevant in their adolescence, as initially described

by Erikson (1963). But the importance of race and ethnicity does not peak in the adoptees' adolescence, it is increasing during the young and late adulthood (McGinnis et al., 2009). This highlights the importance of looking at Korean transracial adoptees' identity development respecting a life span perspective and by regarding their individual context.

3. Loss in Transracial Adoptees

Adoption can be defined as a means of providing some children with security and meeting their developmental needs by legally transferring ongoing parental responsibilities from their birth parents to their adoptive parents; recognizing that in so doing we have created a new kinship network that forever links the two families together through the child, who is shared by both (Reitz & Watson, 1992).This definition from a systemic point of view shows us the complexity of adoption compared to gaining a biological child. In the transition to parenthood through adoption, three systems are involved: the birth parents, the child, and the adoptive parents. Hajal and Rosenberg (1991) described that adoption involves losses in all those three systems. The birth parents lose their child, the child loses his or her birth parents and the adoptive parents lose the hope to gain a biological child. As a result, this may lead to a lifelong grieving process, in which members of the subsystems try to regain what they lost (Hajal & Rosenberg, 1991). As this research aims to center the adoptees' experiences of their adoption, only their losses will be

emphasized.

The loss adopted people experience is not a clear-cut loss. In most cases, adoptees do not have any actual information about their biological family; they do not know whether they will be able to meet their family again, and whether their family would be willing to see them. Boss (1999) described this nature of loss ambiguous loss. It is the uncertainty of the situation which makes these losses the most stressful of all losses. Ambiguous loss is the most devastating loss of all the losses people may experience in their personal relationships due to its unclear and undetermined nature. Boss also emphasizes that people hunger for certainty, even though certainty may include death. People prefer to know negative but certain information than continuing a life with doubt. Ambiguous loss may lead to personal and familial problems because of the situation which is out of control and its outside constraints which hinder the grieving and adaptation process (Boss, 1999).

Boss (1999) explained in five points why the nature of ambiguous loss is so stressful for people. Firstly, because of the confusing nature of the loss, people are immobilized or stocked. The situation is uncertain and people do not know whether the problem is final or just temporary. This involves that people are unable to make a clear sense of the situation, which hinders their problem-solving process. Secondly, the uncertainty of the loss prevents people to adjust roles and rules in their family relationships, so that the relationships

may freeze in time and place. Thirdly, contrary to clear-cut losses there are no symbolic rituals, which could support people experiencing ambiguous loss in their grieving process. There is only little validation and sympathy in the surrounding community which may support people experiencing ambiguous loss. Fourthly, the absurd nature of ambiguous loss reminds people that life is not always rational and may lead people to withdraw rather than to provide support for people living with uncertainty. And lastly, because of the on-going manner ambiguous loss involves, people may feel physically and emotionally exhausted.

Boss (1999) emphasized that there are two kinds of ambiguous losses. The first type is when a person is physically present but psychologically absent. Like family members suffering from Alzheimer disease or dementia. The second type of ambiguous loss, is defined when a person is physically absent but psychologically present. Examples for this second type are people missing, or the loss of birth parents for adoptees. The loved person is missing but due to the uncertain situation, the grieving process is hindered or frozen. Adoptees may be unsure if their birth parents are still alive, why they decided to release him or her for adoption and if they would be interested in meeting him or her again. Questions like this may be experienced by adoptees and reflect the ambiguous nature of their situation (Boss, 1999). Abrams (2001) mentioned that adoptees may experience the loss of their birth parents, which may be ambiguous in its nature and may hinder the grieving process.

Adoptees know that there is another pair of parents somewhere, parents to whom they are biologically related, parents which they resemble and parents which are defined in our society as the “real” parents. But adoptees are many times not sure, who they are, if they are still alive or not, why they decided not to keep him or her, and if there may be other siblings. Especially in international adoption such important background information is difficult to receive. Passmore (2007) described that adoptees esperience three different losses, the loss of the birth parents, the loss of the biological connection to the adoptive familiy, and the loss of identity or background information. All these losses may make the adoptees’ situation full of ambiguity and uncertainity.

Two studies assessed the ambiguous loss adoptees experience by building upon the uncertainty reduction theory of Berger and Calabrese (1975), which assumed that ambiguity is an adverse situation, which people try to overcome or reduce. As the results show only a small part of adoptees actively try to decrease the uncertainty by searching for their birth parents (Warner Colaner & Kranstube, 2010). The search for the birth parents may be expected to lessen the degree of uncertainty experienced by adoptees. However, the results of Powell and Afifi (2005) showed that the level of uncertainty and ambiguous loss increased with the active search for the birth parents.

4. Sense of Belongingness and Identity Construction

The racial differences among adoptees and their surrounding do not solely

complicate the development of a firm sense of self, but also the adoptees' sense of belongingness. Hagerty and colleagues (1992) described the sense of belongingness as the personal involvement in a system in a way that people perceive their involvement as valued. People have the feeling of a fit between them and the system (Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, & Collier, 1992). This sense of fit-in may be challenged for transracial adoptees due to their racially distinct features.

Kim, Suyemoto, and Turner (2010) interviewed 14 Korean transracial adoptees highlighting the impact sense of belonging and sense of exclusion have on their racial and ethnic identities. Participants in that study expressed a sense of exclusion growing up in a predominately uniform American neighborhood due to their racial differences. On the other side they experienced a sense of exclusion in Korea due to ethnical and cultural gaps between them and the Korean society (Kim et al., 2010). In the place the adoptees grow up, they experience a sense of belonging due to the shared cultural values and traditions. But at the same time they have to cope with racial differences, which may lead to a sense of exclusion. Coming back to Korea they show the same racial features with the society, which may lead to a sense of belonging. On the other hand, the lack of knowledge of the Korean culture and language leads to a sense of exclusion. This reflects well the complexity of Korean transracial adoptees situation and its challenges to develop a sense of belongingness.

Kim (2007) showed that Korean transracial adoptees experience the feeling of blending in during their first travel back to Korea. But this first impression is challenged very quickly due to their encounters with the dominant ethnic nationalism of the Korean society (Kim, 2007). Korean transracial adoptees may have a difficult time back in Korea due to the cultural and linguistic gap between them and the Korean society.

Hübinette (2004) illustrates the situation of Korean transracial adoptees with the metaphor of a third space. The third space, between the Korean utopian dream of global ethnic community and the Western culture expecting assimilation and loyalty.

III. METHODOLOGY

The following part will give an insight in the methodology describing the data collection instrument, the recruitment of participants, the researcher's subjectivity and the data analyzing method.

1. Research Method

In order to understand more about the life experience Korean transracially adopted children make by growing up in a transracial family and in a European country, data was collected by using in-depth interviews. Seidman (2006) describes three sequential interview sessions which allow us to get a deeper insight in the participants' life stories. The first interview focuses on the general experience of being a Korean adopted person growing up in a transracial family and in a European country. The goal of the first interview is to assess the context of the adoptees experience. The second interview session allows more details of the life experience in different areas. During the third and last interview session the reflexion and meaning of being a Korean transracially adopted child receives the main attention.

With respect of Seidman's propositions, two interview sessions were adapted. The aim of the first interview was to assess the context of the adoptees experience and the questions addressed general experiences in the adoptive family, in school, and in the community. The first interview started

with the question; *Can you talk about three days in your life you will never forget?*

The second interview focused on the meaning the participants gave to their experience. After a break of at least two days between the interview sessions, the interview proceeded with questions addressing the adoptees' reflections and their perception. Before starting the second interview session, the adoptees were asked, how they felt after the first interview and if there were any things they would like to add. During the second interview session, questions like; '*How did the experience of being a transracial adopted Person affect/influence your identity over time?*' were addressed.

The sum of the interviews lasted between 1 hour and 2.5 hours. The 42 open-ended interview questions (see attachment) were formulated to gather a deeper insight in the adoptees' experience, by respecting a life span perspective. The questions were formulated by the author in order to assess the adoptees' life experience respecting the following areas: adoptees' personal life, adoptive family, school life, community, birth family, cultural socialization and identity, and finally the changes of perception over time. Some questions were rephrased and adapted from previous qualitative research questions focusing on ambiguous loss and identity development. After formulating various interview questions, they were adjusted to the concept of Seidman (2006). The first interview started with the question: *Can you talk about three days in you will never forget?* And the last interview

ended with the question: *Given what you have reconstructed in these interviews, where do you see yourself going in the future?*

The interviews with two of the participants were conducted in a seminar room of the author's university. And the interviews with the third participant was conducted in a public coffee shop. Since all the participants were fluent in English all the interviews were accomplished in English. A few times German and French was used in order to clarify our understanding and in order to avoid possible language barriers.

2. Participants

Procedures of participant recruitment and data collection were approved by the Institutional Review Board of Seoul National University. Given the potential difficulty to recruit adoptees who grew up in a European country, multiple recruiting methods were used. Collaboration with a non-profit organization for Korean overseas adoptees was established. The organization published a flyer on their Facebook site and two interested participants contacted the author via e-mail. The third participant was recruited using a snowball sampling method. After giving the participants deeper information about the aims of the research, all of them agreed to participate in the study. To protect the participants' identity, pseudonyms are used.

All the three participants were Korean adoptees, who grew up in European countries. One of the participants requested not to mention his nationality, in

order to protect his identity. Their age ranged from 35 to 46 years. All the three adoptees were unmarried at the time of the data collection. Their age of placement ranged from 3 months up to 6 years. All the adoptees had at least one sibling who was also adopted from South Korea. In two cases their siblings were biologically related. The three participants grew up in a family with Caucasian parents and in a neighborhood which was predominately uniform. All the three participants were currently living and working or studying in South Korea. Their length of stay in South Korea ranged from 5 to 8 years. All the three participants came to Korea to learn more about their birth background and searched for their birth family. There is a lack of research focusing on Korean transracial adoptees' experience once they settle down in their country of background. This study aims to fill this gap by listening to their perception about their journey from Europe to Korea. Therefore only Korean transracial adoptees coming back to Korea and spending some time in their birth country were included.

Box 1 Brief Information of participants at the time of the interview

Orlando 35 years - was adopted at the age of 5 years together with his younger biological sister into a European family. He grew up without any knowledge about Korea and about his background. At an adult age, he decided to come to Korea to learn more about the culture and to actively search for his birth family. With help of his Korean girlfriend, he met his birth mother. At the time of the interview he was living and working in South Korea.

Sarah 36 years – was adopted at the age of 3 months into a European family and she has a younger brother also coming from Korea. She grew up without any knowledge about Korea and about her background. At an adult age, she decided to come to Korea to learn more about the culture and to search for her birth family. Sarah has not been able to find her birth family at the day of the interview due to the lack of information. Allthough she has been searching for around 10 years. At the time of the interview, she was doing her doctoral studies in South Korea.

Mike 46 years – was adopted at the age of 6 years together with his younger biological brother into a European family, where already two Korean sisters were present. His parents were member of an Association for families with Korean adoptees. Growing up he had some contact with other Korean people or children. At an adult age, he decided to come to Korea to learn more about the culture and to search for his birth family. With the help of an organization for Korean adoptees he could find some members of his birth family. At the time of the interview he was doing his Master degree in South Korea.

3. Researcher's Subjectivity

To ensure the objectivity of this research I would like to provide a clearer insight in my personal role and perception of Korean transracial adoption. As the interviews and the data analysis were conducted by myself, it is necessary

to give my point of view. As a Swiss person studying in South Korea for almost two years, I am aware of the cultural differences between Korea and Europe. I share similar values and cultural traditions with Korean transracial adoptees, who grew up in a European country. The significant point differing between the participants and my experience living in Korea lies in the way we look; our racial appearances. Living in Korea as a Caucasian person or a Korean person is essentially different.

This includes that no Korean person would expect Caucasian people to learn the Korean language or to adapt to Korean values. If Western people do so they receive high amazement from the Korean society. The opposite expectations exist for Korean people growing up in Western countries. Korean people are expected to speak Korean and to behave like Koreans, even if they learned and grew up overseas. If the people with Korean background are not able to fulfill these expectations, they receive a lot of intrusive reactions and comments. Another point I would like to highlight is that I do not have any personal experience of adoption. This is why in this study I will take the role of a student and the adoptees are the experts. My goal is to learn from the participants' life experience in order to receive a deeper insight in their lifelong journey.

4. Data Analysis

Interpretative description was applied to define shared experiences among

the three participants and to give an insight in the nature of their journey (Throne, 2004). The 6 audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and read numerous times identifying the sections in the narratives which best reflected the adoptees' experience over time. Since the aim of the study was to reflect and to describe the adoptees' journey, similarities and differences were highlighted. In a first step every participant's unique life experience was highlighted by visualizing their family situation and by collecting the participant's main themes. In the second step all these descriptive life themes were collected by placing them on a flash, symbolizing the life span. The life span started with the time point of adoption to the day of the interview and their future projects. In the different life periods, adoption placement, childhood and time after adoption, adolescents and early adulthood, and their return to Korea, main themes emerged. Focusing on the main topics throughout the participants' life span, a shared process was visible. The main themes revealed in the adoptees' life journey were; adaptation after adoption, school experience, birth parents' search motivation, coping with loss, and adaptation to the Korean society. After arranging the most descriptive subjects in the participants' narratives respecting a life span perspective, a cross-case analysis was conducted.

IV. RESULTS

The adoptees shared their experience of growing up in an environment which is fully orientated on European traditions and without any knowledge about Korean culture. Their narratives reflected their journey of adapting to the European society and repulsing existing differences during childhood and adolescents. Later on, they shared their rising interest in Korea and their search motivation for their biological roots. After being able to meet their birth parents, two of the participants' adaptation process was newly challenged due to expectations from the Korean society. Growing up in Europe incorporating European values and traditions and after spending multiple years in their birth country made participants more aware of their preferences. For all participants, their time in Korea showed to be limited and they had the plan to return to their home country in Europe. The narratives represented how the journey of adoptees is challenged by identity development, coping with losses and the lack of sense of belongingness. From the analysis of the three narratives, the following three themes emerged: 1) *Making sense of loss* illustrating the experience of loss they live in Europe and their journey back to Korea; 2) *Making sense of lack of belongingness* describing the adoptees' experience of racism and their effort being part of the society in Europe and later in Korea; 3) *Negotiation and realization of having European and Korean identities,* emphasizing the adoptees' reflections about

their identity and their adaptation to a life with ongoing loss. Within these themes, participants showed similar and also distinct experiences, which made every journey very unique in its particular context. Below the cross-case analysis of Sarah's, Orlando's, and Mike's narratives.

1. Ongoing Loss

Sarah was placed in her adoptive family at the age of three months. Orlando and Mike were placed rather late, at the age of 5 and 6 years. Due to the late placement of Orlando and Mike, they have precise and sensitive memories related to their placement and to their adaptation process. In their narratives they describe their first days arriving in the new country, living with people they do not know, receiving a new name, and their difficulties related to the new language.

1) Something is Missing

Existing research emphasizes that children placed after two years show more challenges in their adaptation process (Howe, Shemmings, & Julia, 2001). Among the great amount of research existing about adoption, the experience and memories adoptees have about the day they were placed in a new family remains poor. The following narratives may give an insight how older children experience their placement. Two of the three participants had

vivid memories about their first day arriving in the new country and into an unknown family. Mike's narratives describe his arrival in the European country and how he met his adoptive parents the first time.

> *…it's when I arrived in (European country). And after the quarantine, the parents came to bring us home. They came to the hospital, and they brought us to the station, and yeah… they were thinking to take the public transportation, the bus. And at that time the father hold me up in his arms, and I was crying and shouting so loud, that they thought it will not be possible to take public transportation. They took a taxi. Yeah, about my reaction I think I was not used to be hold in arms, with somebody I did not know.*

Orlando was adopted at the age of 5 years and he also shared intense memories related to his placement into a new family.

> *You know, I was young, I was five years old, but I can remember what happened…Maybe the first month I was very scared. There is a new house…Why are we here? And after that, I knew they are taking care of us. Feeling safe. I think this is really important for children.*

The narrative of Mike and Orlando reflected the transition from South Korea into a totally new and unknown environment, in which no one was able to communicate in Korean. The participants went through a phase of instability and uncertainty without being able to communicate their emotions and fears with their primary caregiver. This situation is well demonstrated in

Mike's narratives.

> *At the earliest stage of adoption, I was not able to understand why adults are not able to understand what I'm saying. Because at that time I was still speaking Korean and my parents of course could only speak (another language). It was really strange for me because my understanding of that time was that everyone is speaking the same language. And of course all adults should be able to understand children (laugh).*

One of the major challenges in a transracial adoptive family resides in the difference in racial and ethnic cultural heritage of the child and his adoptive parents. During the time Sarah, Mike and Orlando were adopted, adoptive parents were advised to pretend like a normal family without any special attention to the differences among them and their children. Ahn-Redding and Simon (2007) argue that the first generation of Korean transracial adoptees grew up in families promoting a color-blind approach. Even adoptees which were adopted in the later years may have grown up in families supporting the idea that race does not matter (Ahn-Redding & Simon, 2007). As a result the participants grew up knowing they were adopted from South Korea, but without any cultural knowledge about their birth heritage. The following passages in the narratives of Sarah, Orlando and Mike represent this condition. Orlando tells how his adoptive parents were advised not to teach their children about Korean culture.

For my parents, people told them they have to cut us off, my sister and me. We have to cut everything with Korean culture. No Korean food. No Korean TV. No Korean books, ah….really you have to cut everything to blend in French culture.

The only thing Sarah remembers to know about Korea, were the Olympics in 1988 and a small part in an encyclopedia about the Jeju female divers. In her narratives she expresses the importance to teach children, where they are coming from. And her frustration about being adopted to foreign country without knowing anything about Korea.

And I think it could have been different, if I was raised differently. And if you know…people or my family didn't…of course they didn't know any better, but if they would have known that it is better to teach your child about where he is coming from. Or if I would not have been adopted into another country at all. I don't think it's good to adopt children to another country.

Mike recounts in his narratives how his parents were part of an association for adoptive parents of Korean born children and how they tried to connect him with other Korean people. At the same time he narrates an example of an adoptive mother who actively tried to learn more about Korean culture before adopting children.

They did not try by themselves. I know one adoptee parent, who came to Korea, and she learned herself Korean language. And probably

she passed directly to her adoptive children. But it was not the case of my parents. So I would say they tried more to put us in contact with other Koreans.

The interviews reflected how parents tried to support their children in adapting to the European country and how the adoptees themselves experienced these parental efforts. Yoon (2001, 2008) highlighted the importance of parental support in the ethnic identity development of their transracially adopted Korean children. In the previous narratives we can notice a discrepancy between parental efforts and the children's expectation. Similar results were found in the study of Kim, Reichwald, & Lee (2013), highlighting the discrepancy between adoptive parents perception of their engagement in ethnic and racial socialization and their children's perception of parental efforts.

2) Trying to Fill the Gaps

While all participants in their childhood and adolescents showed very low interest or even repulsion towards Korean culture, a deeper attention arose during their early adulthood. Sarah, Orlando and Mike started to become more interested in their Korean heritage during their early adulthood and decided to visit Korea in order to learn more about their birth heritage. The search for their birth parents displayed very unique experiences among the three participants. Mike described his search for his birth family as really fast and

easy. After visiting an organization for adopted people in his home country he waited multiple months without an answer for his request to find his birth family. Meanwhile he benefited from the opportunity for European Korean adoptees to visit his birth country during the summer. During this trip Korean adoptees have the opportunity to visit their adoption agency and also to actively search for their birth family with the help of a social worker.

> *So I had a file review with a social worker, yeah showing your documents and so on. And also I said them that I would like to find my birth mother. But I was thinking it would be really hard and it would take really long time and I would be back in (European country). So maybe it was in the second or third week from the tour, but I stayed two more weeks for myself. And 10 days after the visit of the adoption agency, I received a call from them, and they were asking me; are you still interested in meeting your mother? And I said yes. And they said ok, so we have found her, when would you like to meet her and so on.*

In contrast, Sarah's and Orlando's birth mother search experiences were full of frustrations and disappointments. Sarah had searched for her birth family for more than 10 years and was not able to locate it due to the lack of some important information.

> *But the…if you don't have the necessary information, the organizations cannot really do a lot for you. So they can only do like*

standard things. I need other information or more information. For example, her ID number and her birth date. So, either they don't have that or they can't give it. Because of my mother's privacy. But I am not sure. But the birth certificate doesn't have the necessary information to locate her through the normal organizations.

As also described in Sarah's narratives, the adoptee organizations are not able to provide constructive support for adoptees in their search for their birth family, if the adoption file does not provide the necessary information. Orlando is describing his interaction with a social worker in the adoption agency.

And I went there, and I remember there was this French adoptee guy, and you know this guy speaks very well French, Korean and I talk with him about what happened, and he just opened the file and said "oh there is nothing in your file and it's going to be very hard for you to find your family." I said ok, I am going to try everything, going on TV, in the newspaper, and ahh…You know it was very frustrating for me this time, because just with the help of my Korean girlfriend, and you know she does not have any authorities, she didn't work for any local government, or anything in administration, but she found everything. And that guy he just opened my file and said there is nothing, ok, bye. He didn't help me a lot.

The success of the search for the birth parents is depending on the amount

and the correctness of the information the adoption file provides. Unfortunately in many cases that information was not treated with the necessary respect to allow adoptees to reconnect to their biological roots.

Mike and Orlando had the possibility to participate in a summer trip to Korea organized by a non-profit organization for overseas adoptees. Back in Korea all the three participants established a connection to their adoption agency which was in possession of their adoption file. The narratives of all the three participants reflect the lack and untruthful information related to their background. Orlando is describing the moment when he was opening his adoption file.

> *So I went there (adoption agency) with my sister and opened my file…and there was NOTHING! I just knew that I was born in Busan.*

Sarah and Orlando found out that some of the information noted in their adoption file was incorrect, which caused feelings of not being threatened with respect. Sarah shared her frustration about growing up with wrong information about her background.

> *When I was growing up, I only knew that I was an abandoned baby at a police station and that they brought me to my adoption agency, then I was adopted. I also didn't know my birth date, because it was estimated. Later it turned out that my file had a birth certificate. So I was born in a midwife clinic. So now I know my birth date, which is different. Well, I heard such stories before, that they change*

information. So it was kind of…but it was still a surprise or maybe even a shock. And I also felt kind of cheated.

Mike has some vivid memories before his adoption. He knew that his biological father died and that he has one older brother who was not released for adoption. He also remembers the day his grandmother brought him to the adoption agency and explained him that he would be adopted. He also expresses his thankfulness for his adoptive father's careful collection of his adoption records and his willingness to openly share all the information.

I had part of information because my grandmother explained to me that I would be adopted. And I also had some memories about the family situation. I requested from my father, but really late, my adoption file he received from the adoption agency. But it was really standard. On the other side I have to be thankful to my father, because he collected the file of the adoption process.

Although their modest amount of information the participants had about their background, Orlando and Mike were able to find their birth mother and some other family members. During the past 10 years, Sarah tried numerous options to locate her birth family, but was still not able to find them at the time of the interview.

All the three participants were very active in their search for their birth parents. They tried numerous options to find their birth family, like connection to adoptee organizations, participation in a TV program, and publication of an

article in the newspaper. Orlando and Mike even arranged a meeting between adoptive family and birth family, and were aware of the rareness of that situation.

2. Making Sense of Lack of Belongingness

All three participants came back to Korea in order to learn more about their birth background. How they experienced this journey back to Korea is described in the following paragraphs.

1) Trying to Fit In

Growing up in an environment which is predominately uniform and going to school belonging to a minority caused some challenges for the participants. All three participants shared a school environment in which the majority of children were European. The fact of looking different from the other children caused some challenges for participants. Orlando describes in his narratives how other children reacted to him as the only Asian child in class.

> *So, yeah that was very tough. I remember when I was in the class room…everybody speaks French except me. So…I didn't have friends, because nobody wants to talk to me because I do not understand anything.*

Sarah, Orlando and Mike experienced racism throughout their life span. In

the following passage Sarah explains how she started to feel uncomfortable the way she looks due to racist comments from other children or adults.

> *And ahh…having a sense of being discriminated against, you know like other school kids, they always have to call out that you look different. But also by other adults, because in Netherland it's really much like, if you are not White then you are not really Dutch.*

Mike remembered some racist comments from outsider against himself, but he describes such experiences as a normal reaction of young children towards differences. He also described that he got more aware of the situations he experienced much later in his life.

> *I mean I got all this kind of consciousness later. So…I think I have been a child a teenager not so much conscious about all the social interactions, and social construction of all those interactions and so on. So more have developed as a blind child (laugh).*

Also a research about healthy identity development of Korean transracial adoptees conducted by McGinnis, Livingston Smith, Scott, and Howard (2009) showed that the high majority of Korean transracial adoptees (78%) experiences racial discrimination. The results showed that 80% of adoptees experience racial discrimination from stranger, 75% from classmates, 48% from childhood friends and 39% from teachers. The experience of racial discrimination is not solely limited to these areas; adoptees also experience racial teasing within the family system (McGinnis et al., 2009).

Even though racism was a serious issue in the journey of Sarah and Orlando, they faced difficulties to find emotional support. Their anger, frustration and woundedness are well reflected in their narratives. Orlando recounts how he was unable to discuss his issue related to racism with somebody.

> *Ah I never talked about this (racism) with my sister. I don't know. Maybe to protect her. But at the same time I remember I wanted to see, not a doctor, but kind of a shrink (psycho therapist). Because my mum saw that something was wrong with me. But still I couldn't talk with this shrink. She did not help me a lot.*

Also Sarah reflects how she tried to speak about the challenges related to racism with her parents and how she remained aggrieved.

> *They would just say, like you have to ignore it…because if people say bad words, like words don't hurt. You know they would say those kind of things to me, when we were little. But it don't really…I felt…I didn't feel taken seriously. Because it really hurt me.*

As a European person myself, I know that there is a huge lack of knowledge about Korea in European countries. Growing up as a European child I only knew that there is war between the southern and northern part of Korea. I did not know anything about Korean culture. Most European people are not aware of the differences between Asian people coming from China, Japan or Korea. Asian people are commonly described as Chinese people as

emphasized by all the participants in this study.

The racial dissimilarities adoptive parents and their children have cause a very unique context, which may lead to a lack of understanding. This situation is well highlighted in Mike's interview. He mentions in his narratives the difficulty of adoptive parents to fully understand their children's experiences.

> *And with my parents I think there is a certain level of understanding, but some parts they are not able. It's not because of them but because of their situation.*

Parents may not be aware of the racism their children experience due to the racial differences, which put them in a completely different context. This is also highlighted in the study of McGinnis et al., (2009), in which many Korean transracially adopted person described the lack of understanding and awareness their adoptive parents have regarding being a person of color in a predominately uniform society.

2) Being In-Between

The adoptees journey does not end with the reunion of birth family members. Even after getting in contact with their birth family and their birth country, challenges arise. Orlando is expressing his frustration about the actual relationship he has with his birth mother.

> *I really feel like I want to be alone with my mum. Like let's have a coffee and let's talk. And every time my grandmother or other family*

members are coming with us. But nobody is speaking English. It's not even like someone is coming with her to help me with the translation. I feel like they don't trust me or I don't know…

Mike described the confusing feelings toward his birth mother.

So, logically, rationally I know she is my birth mother, but emotionally it's still like in between.

Orlando suffered a lot due to racism during his childhood and adolescence in France. Even after coming back to Korea, the country where all the people look like him, he was not exempted of discrimination. After connecting to his birth family, he became aware of the racial hierarchical ideologies of them and was really frustrated about it.

You know especially the feeling I had…I was very upset…they (birth family) were more interested to meet my French parents, like my White parents, compared to me and my sister. They said like "it's so cool to have White family."

The challenges related to the reconnection with the birth family and the building of the relationship with the birth family may differ from the adoptees initial expectations. Prébin (2013) emphasizes in her book about Korean transnational adoption that not all reunions and relationships with the birth parents are successful and harmonic. She highlights issues related to Korean cultural values and expectations, which influence the relationship between the adopted person and the birth family.

At the time of the interview all the three participants were living in South Korea, for at least five years. Coming to Korea allowed them to interact and exchange with Korean people and other adoptees. Sarah, Orlando and Mike all learned Korean language and enjoy living in Korea.

The life in Korea allowed the adoptees to interact with other Korean people around them, and made them aware of the expectations the Korean society has towards them. Coming back to Korea did not solely display a connection to their birth country; there were many expectations and perceptions from the Korean society towards them. Orlando has regular contact with members of his birth family, which expect him to behave like a Korean. His narratives reflect how he feels upset because of such comments and situations.

> *Every time I speak, you know, I can speak Korean, but they always tell me that my accent is really bad. Or my accent is not like from Busan or America. So, sometimes I feel like, why do I even try to speak Korean? So I should just speak English and that's all. But ahh…I feel very frustrated. And frustrated also because they treat me, like I have to behave like a Korean. And ahh…I'm not. I don't want to. Why should I?*

Orlando experienced such comments not just among his birth family, but also at his work place other Korean people want him to behave like a Korean. The following narrative reflects that situation.

Challenges with work. Because they see me as a Korean, so I have to behave like a Korean. And ahh…I don't want to. I don't have to. Everybody told me "yeah…you have Korean blood, you have to behave like that." You know like in the company. It's not even my family. And I say no, no, no, I behave like the way I want. I don't have to. Yeah always I am polite, of course! But I don't need to be like that. Yeah I don't want to pretend. Even if they see me as a Korean guy, I am French inside. "Deal with it! I am not going to change for you."

The Korean society has expectations towards Korean people, but the fulfillment may be impossible for transracial adoptees. These expectations are well reflected in Orlando's narratives. Also the study of Higgins and Stoker (2010) showed the difficult situations transracial adoptees experience in their interactions with other Korean people. Participants in that study expressed the pressure they receive from other Koreans to learn and to be able to speak Korean. Another point which was highlighted is the different expectations the Korean society has towards foreigners' Korean language ability and Korean adoptees' language ability. As a European person living and studying in Korea, I can confirm the discriminate expectations regarding language ability the Korean society has towards Asian and Caucasian people. Korean people feel very touched seeing a European person trying to speak some broke words of their language, and at the same time they lack of sensitiveness for the

difficulty other Asian people experience by learning Korean. This situation is frustrating and demotivating for Korean transracial adoptees.

As described in the narratives of Sarah, Orlando and Mike, they grew up looking Korean but with a European ethnicity. Sarah, Orlando and Mike highlighted in their narratives that many people wrongly assume that Korean adoptees have a Korean culture, see them as multicultural people. Sarah mentions in her narratives that this is not the case.

> *It's not like we have two cultures. People always think that. But that's not true, because Korean adoptees, we were adopted overseas, so we don't have Korean culture or a Korean identity.*

Mike is giving a metaphor to explain his feelings of being European inside but looking Korean from the outside.

> *And so I developed with a feeling to be (European). Yeah ok I have also to mention, that the family and the extended family never discriminated us against White children. I had no feeling of rejection or to be differentiated. So it's a really positive point. So I developed an identity of a White but of course with Korean face. So in English we call it Banana.*

This sense of self was challenged by coming back to Korea, due to comments and expectations the Korean society has towards them. The life in Korea and the reconnection with their birth family evoke a new period of rethinking and re-adapting their identity for Orlando and Mike.

Mike is recounting about his identity formation process and about his unsureness about how much he would like to adapt to the Korean society without losing his European identity. In his narratives he explains his change of perception.

> *Before several years ago I was thinking of belonging and identity. As the cap was like 100%. But talking with other people I changed my conception and I…Ok, I can be 100% (European) but I don't have to be less (European) to be Korean. So I changed the concept and so I can become more Korean without being less (European).*

The anew process of identity crisis is also visible in Orlando's narratives. He recounts how his identity unsureness affects the relationship with his girlfriend.

> *Yeah I am sure it affects my relationship with my girlfriend. I told her, that maybe I have some identity issues. Like identity; Am I French? Am I Korean? Like she asks me all the time; "are you sure, will you forever live in Korea?" And I say "No I am not sure." But ahh… "Are you going back to France?" Yeah, of course. If I really want to be committed with her, she really needs to know.*

3. Negotiation of Their Europeanness and Korean Background

During the last interview with the participants their perception and the meaning they give to their life experience was the major focus. No one else can explain what it means to be a Korean transracial adopted person with more fitting words than the adoptees themselves.

1) Living with Ongoing Loss

Due to the lack of certain information Sarah was not yet able to find her birth family. In her narratives, her frustration of not being able to do anything to find her birth family is noticeable.

> *...because everyone else knows where he or she is coming from. Yeah, and if you don't know that, that's kind of...you always wonder.*

After an emotional search for their birth family, the participants hoped to get a deeper understanding in the reasons and motivations for their adoption. Although Orlando and Mike were able to find and meet their birth mother and some extended family members, they remain with open questions. Mike expresses in his narratives that the only responsible person for his adoption was his grandmother and that he cannot see any reason why two out of three children were released for adoption.

> *Because my consideration is that, because they were a rich family. They could effort to have three kids, or three grandsons. For me there was no reason to send us for adoption. I am just wondering why that person, who took the power, decided that. Because I don't*

see rational or logic arguments. The only conclusion I could have is greediness. So this is my feeling. Of course I can be totally wrong.

Orlando emphasizes the remaining desire to know what happened and why he and his sister were released for adoption. In his narratives the frustration of not being able to get that information is present.

My Korean mum she doesn't want to tell me what really happened. Like every time I start questioning her about this, she starts crying…(upset) and I cannot do anything. So, you know I tried to be close with them, but I know they are hiding something from me.

Even though Orlando and Mike were able to find some members of their birth family, there remains in an unclear situation about the reasons and background of their adoption. As earlier described, the loss adoptees experience is not solely the loss of their birth parents, it's also the loss of background information and identity (Passmore, 2007). Even though Orlando and Mike could find their birth family, they need to know why adoption took place, why they were send abroad. Without trustful information about their adoption background they remain in a situation of uncertainty, which they hoped to overcome by meeting their birth family.

2) Distortion Between the Way They Feel and the Way They Look

All the three participants had the feeling of distortion between the way they look and the way they feel. Growing up in a predominately uniform

society made them feel very different from other children. The following passage in Orlando's interview shows how difficult it was for him to look like a Korean.

> *Tough! Very tough, because I didn't understand…yeah I understand, when I put my face in the mirror that I did not look like the other children. But very tough. I didn't choose it…you know I feel like I was a victim.*

Also Sarah narrates the discrepancy between the way she grew up and the way she looks.

> *So, we didn't, I didn't know anything about Korea. So…yeah… it was basically growing up as a normal Dutch person, but I still looked…I didn't look Dutch…*

For Mike the feeling and the sense of being European was so strong that he needed some time to become aware of his Korean heritage. The following part in his narratives illustrates this situation.

> *When I came for my first longer stay here in Korean it was back in 99. I was 30 years old and at that time, I really realized that I am not White ethnic or...Because in that time I saw an advertisement for a pharma logical or hospital survey, and they were looking for some White, or Caucasians to participate in some tests. And I thought yeah I could go and get some easy pocket money. And I needed one day to realize, that of course I cannot go because I am Korean ethnic.*

All the three participants grew up in a predominately uniform society with uniquely European cultures and traditions. This socialization gave them a strong sense of European identity, which diverges with the way they look. This is confirmed by one of the biggest study about Korean transracial adoptees' identity development conducted by McGinnis et al., (2009), which showed that 78% of adoptees reported that, as children they had considered themselves or wanted to be Caucasian.

3) Lack of Sense of Belongingness

In the following narratives Sarah, Orlando and Mike tell us what it means to be a Korean transracial adopted person. Orlando expresses the lack of connection with Korea and the significance to know that he is not alone.

> *We all are born in Korea, we have both Korean descents, but we are raised by European or American families. So we all have kind of, for me especially French values. You know it's very different from the "Kyopo". They have Korean family, and speak Korean. They have a Korean connection. But for us the connection is with the adoptive family. So that's why it's different. But you know; now I know that I'm not alone. You know we are more than 200,000.*

Mike describes that being a Korean transracial adopted person, one can never really be invisible in the crowd, that there are always situations which

make him feel different.

> *Yeah ok…It's not to belong to the mainstream, to be different. Ah how do they say…to have a third place, not to belong to the (European) population neither to the Korean. So something in between. To have to play the bridge role. I mean Western people expect me to know about Korean and Korean expect me to know about (European country) or everything about (European country). But when you see the complexity, sometimes if have just no idea. But they are still expecting an answer, so they are still expecting you to be a bridge. I think it used to be different. So, something like, you cannot blend in. You cannot be like anonymous in the crowd. I mean you can be in the subway with all other Koreans, but it doesn't last long because, there will be somebody coming to you and asking for the way, and you don't know, you cannot exactly understand what they are asking for and you don't know the way. So, yeah well ok I look like a Korean but yeah…but definitely, ultimately I am not a Korean. So you have this kind of relief that you are disbarring in the crowd, but again something is coming and reminding you that you are not. So you are at the end in between. Yeah…I would say to be different and to have that distortion between the outlook and the inner side.*

Sarah describes transracial adoption as injustice, due to the lack of belonging it causes among adopted people.

Mhh…that your kind an exile. I think that describes my feeling the best. So, not an expatriate or immigrant, because an immigrant…we are not immigrants, we moved up. You know? Immigrants usually move down. So, we didn't have those hardships. But we are also not expatriates, because it's not like we have two cultures. People always think that. But that's not true, because Korean adoptees, we were adopted overseas, so we don't have Korean culture or a Korean identity. So, it feels like it is denied to you. Or it's taken away. Being adopted transracially feels for me like injustice. I would even say, for me…it's a violation of our human rights. So that…I know they meant it well…you know. But it was not the right thing to do. Like you always feel an on longing or a desire for your motherland, or for the place where you were born. But you don't live there. And the place you live, you are always like an outsider. So, you don't feel a place, wherever…the country you grew up, you don't feel home there. But you also don't feel home in Korea. Because you don't…most don't speak Korean. And you are not really Korean. Not, like normal Koreans.

All the three participants mentioned the difficulty to belong to a place, to feel home, being able to blend in, as a major challenge in their life. After coming back and spending multiple years in Korea, adoptees became more aware about their identity with their Korean heritage but also about their

identity regarding European values they acculturated. Sarah, Orlando, and Mike planned to return to their European country and to visit Korea during holidays. Sarah highlights in her narratives that she plans to settle down in Netherland and to send her daughter to school there, because school life in Korea is much different from the school experiences European children have.

> *Well, I want to settle down somewhere, because my daughter is going to school and stuff. And I don't really want her to go to school in Korea. So, I prefer to go to the Netherlands.*

Also Orlando emphasizes in his narratives that once he will have a child, he plans to settle down in France, where he can teach his child French values. Additionally he underlines, that his values differ fundamentally from the values Korean people have.

> *I just want to be…I think it's important for me to have a child on my own. To teach my kids the same values, my parents (adoptive parents) taught me. Yeah…like not to have enemies. And to have a good life. Not about having money…I don't care about. You know here it's all about money. But for me it's not like that. I really think… to find someone I really love…and start to be something really important. Yeah! I think that's really important for me.*

Mike narrates in his narratives that he plans to return to Europe or a Western country in the future. He adds that the place where he really feels home is the country where he grew up.

So I imagine myself being back in (European country) and living or establish again. And coming back to Korea for vacations. And after retirement spending my life in (European country). So basically the Home Sweet Home for me is (European country).

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

"...whether adoption "works" cannot be answered by a simple "yes" or "no", because just as there is no single adoption experience, there is no single correct response"(Ahn-Redding & Simon, 2007, p. vii).

As stated in the previous quote, every adoption experience is very unique and that makes it difficult to judge whether transracial adoption is a constructive intervention or not. Sarah, Orlando, and Mike gave us an insight in their life stories by sharing many private and sensitive experiences. There were topics which made them relive joyful but also painful periods in their life. Sarah narrated in her interview that she would not mind, whether her birth mother had done an abortion. On the other side, Orlando emphasized to feel very lucky that he was adopted in his family and into France. And Mike recounted the lack of emotions he has towards his adoptive family, but also towards his birth family. The journey of Sarah, Orlando and Mike are very unique and they are constantly adapting to new challenges. Nevertheless, there were some common themes that all three participants mentioned in their narratives. The adoptees' journey was and is full of challenges related to identity development and the coping with loss. The major points evolving during the narratives were the adoptees' experience of loss and the lack of sense of belongingness.

1. Sense of Loss

As Irving (2001) emphasized, the major loss adoptees experiences may not be solely explained by the loss of their birth parents. The loss adoptees experience may be the loss of identity or background information, loss of biological relatives, and the loss of biological connection to the adoptive parents (Passmore, 2007). The loss adoptees recounted in their narratives were related to the inability to receive complete information about their biological background, the secrecy related to the adoption motives, and the lack of belongingness. These losses, which show to be ambiguous in its nature, hinder the adoptees in their grieving process. Moreover the inability to receive complete information about their background makes it impossible for the adoptees to integrate all the important factors in order to develop a more complex sense of self. This kind of loss was well reflected in the narratives of Sarah, Orlando, and Mike. The ongoing and unsuccessful search for the birth mother, experienced by Sarah, put her in a situation reflecting ambiguous loss. Sarah also described feelings of being exhausted and not being sure whether to continue or to stop. On the other side Orlando and Mike were able to find their birth relatives, but still there remain open questions which they described as vital in order to get a deeper understanding of their adoption. The narratives showed how the loss changed over time, growing up in Europe they

experienced a rising interest in their birth background. The participants wanted to fill the gaps and learn more about themselves. They came back to Korea hoping to fill these gaps and to receive answers about their biological background. But instead of answering open questions, new gaps emerged and remain open even after reuniting with their birth family.

2. Lack of Sense of Belongingness

Another important challenge the three participants faced was the lack of sense of belongingness. The challenge transracial adoptees face by growing up in a European country is to develop a sense of belonging by growing up in a confusing context of sharing ethnical and cultural values with the majority of the society but by keeping unique racial appearances. The opposite challenge is experienced, when they come back to Korea; they share facial appearances with all the Korean people around them but their ethnicity is marked by the European culture, which causes strains in their interaction with the Korean society. Sarah, Orlando, and Mike narrated the difficulty to find a place where they really belong to, due to the discrepancy between their inside and their outside. This difficulty of belongingness was also described by Hübinette (2004), who highlighted the idea of a “third space”. This results go along with previous research on Korean transracial adoptees expressing their challenge to find a place, where they really fit in (Hübinette, 2004; Trenka, Oparah, & Shin, 2006; Kim, 2007 & Kim, Suyemoto, & Turner, 2010). An

important finding in this research is that the sense of lack of belongingness adoptees experienced changed over time. Growing up in Europe they always looked different from people around them and they had to cope with racism in the everyday life. Back in Korea they shared racial appearences with the population sourrounding them, but their ethnicity causes a big gap between them and the Korean population.

3. Negotiation of their Europeanness and Korean Background

The importance of looking at adoptees experience respecting a life span perspective was necessary to demonstrate the journey of coping and adaptation Korean transracial adoptees face. As described by Crocetti and collegues (2007, 2008, & 2011), a firm sense of self may be challenged and adapted all over the adulthood. This process was well highlighted in the participants' narratives about their return to their birth country. Growing up in a European country and having a Korean birth heritage made the participants feel like some part of themselves was missing. In order to develop a firmer sense of self, Sarah, Orlando, and Mike decided to travel to their birth country to find out more about that missing piece. Coming in contact with the Korean society and Korean culture made the participants more aware of their European identity and the European values they acculturated during their development. The comparison of Korea and their European country allowed them to develop a fuller sense of self by incorporating values of each

ethnicity, which matched best with their persons. How adoptees became more aware of their European values and the importance they showed to transmit those values to their children is a new finding in the research on Korean transracial adoption.

4. Active Agents of Their Lives

Lee (2003) emphasized the importance of looking at transracial adoptees as active agents in their life. The narratives reflected how active the adoptees were and are, all through their life in order to change their situation. Arriving in a European country, the adoptees learned new languages, received a new name and incorporated European values and traditions. During their childhood and adolescence they coped with the visible discrepancy between their appearance and their ethnicity. After a rising interest about their birth heritage, they started an emotionally difficult process of searching their birth family, hoping that all the open questions will be answered. Once reunified with members of their birth family, they faced anew a situation of adaptation to a society: learning Korean language and familiarizing with Korean values and expectations.

The journey of Sarah, Orlando, and Mike highlighted that their identity development is a lifelong process, with ongoing interplay between their self-concept and other peoples' perception of them in the specific context, as described by Cooley (1902). Participants narrated the experience of pressure

and comments from outsiders about themselves as Korean transracial adoptees, which have impacted the way they think about themselves. Similar results were found by Kim, Suyemoto, and Turner (2010). Their analysis of interviews with 14 Korean transracial adoptees showed that outsider comments and expectations may have a great impact on the individuals' identity development.

5. Limitations

This research shows some limitations; the recruitment of the participants was not a random sampling, only self-selected participants were included. Additionally all the participants came back to their birth country and lived there for multiple years. This fact may have an impact on the experiences narrated in the interviews and may not be comparable with all adoption journeys. The in-depth interviews addressed issues related to adoptees' experiences during the last 30-40 years, some memories may have been partly forgotten. It is also important to highlight that every adoption experience is very unique (Passmore, 2007) and that the journey of Sarah, Orlando, and Mike do not reflect all Korean transracial adoptees' life experience.

6. Implications

We can draw some implications for the studies of child development and

family relations based on the results of this research. All the three participants had at least one sibling who was also born in South Korea. In two of the adoptive families, those siblings were biologically related. The fact to have another sibling in the adoptive family who looks alike or who is biologically related may simplify the adoptees life experience to a certain degree. The study conducted by the McGinnis and colleagues (2009) states that adoptees profit from the interactions with children, who were themselves adopted. The placement of Korean children together with their biological siblings or into family with other Korean adoptees should be promoted. A big majority of Korean adoptees experienced racial discrimination in their school, in their neighborhood and also in their family system. Unfortunately many of the Korean transracial adoptees reported their adoptive parents' lack of understanding and awareness in regard of their experience of a Korean person in a predominately uniform society (McGinnis et al., 2009). Equal narratives emerged in the interviews with Sarah, Orlando, and Mike. The experience of racism in Korean transracial adopted person displays a serious problem which needs to be cared for. Therefore adoptive parents should receive more education in order to support their Korean adopted children to cope with racism. A more sensitive parenting regarding racism may not stop the discriminative comments adopted children experience, but at least may help adopted children to feel supported and to feel cared for. Additionally, cultural programs for Korean overseas adoptees should implement more interventions

which support adoptees in their coping with racism and discrimination. All the three participants grew up in a predominately uniform society with many Caucasian people. A more diverse community may support Korean transracial adoptees to find role models and to feel less alienated. Adult Korean adoptees highlighted that their experience and identity development could have been improved by growing up in a more diverse community and by visiting a more diverse school (McGinnis et al., 2009). Same comments were reported in the narratives with Sarah, Orlando and Mike. Therefore, the adoptive parents living environment and possible school institutions should be considered prior to the placement of a child. As described by Trenka, Chinyere Oparah, & Shin (2006) the business of many adoption agencies is not to find parents for children, but to find children for parents. In order to make Korean transracial adoption more acceptable, the child's well-being and development at the moment of adoption and in future should be the only priority in every placement.

7. Directions for Further Research

The fact that the identity development of Sarah, Orlando, and Mike was constantly challenged by people around them emerged in their narratives. For further research focusing on transracial adoptees' identity development, external variables such as other people's perception of transracial adoptees, discrimination, and cultural expectations from birth family and adoptive

family should be controlled. All the participants in this study had at least one Korean sibling in their adoptive family. There is remaining need for future research focusing on transracial adoptees' communication with their also transracially adopted siblings. This research gave us an insight in the life experience Korean transracial adoptees make by growing up in a European country, where their ongoing process of identity development and the coping with ambiguous loss was highlighted. More longitudinal and representative research is needed to describe the ongoing and lifelong journey of adaptation and the identity development Korean transracial adoptees go through.

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VII. APPENDIX

Interview questions

Basic personal Information
Age and gender of adoptee
Age when adoption took place
Adoptive family
Form of adoption (open, confidential)
Community (village, or city / physical transitions)
Educational level (more specific information about school type)

Interview 1: Focus on the Life Story, the Context

Adoptee's personal life

- Can you tell me about three days you will never forget?
- What are your earliest memories related to your adoption?
- Can you describe when you first found out about your adoption?
- Can you tell me about your experience of growing up as a transracially adopted child in a European country?

Adoptive Family

- Tell me about your family.
- Can you describe special times you and your family shared?
- Can you tell me the story about the time, when you first recognized that there are differences between you and your parents?
- How would you describe the relationship and interactions you have with your adoptive family?
- How would you describe the communication about adoption in your family?
- What are you doing today to keep the relationship with you adoptive family?

School

- How was your school life when you were in elementary school?
- How was your school life when you were in middle school?
- How was your school life when you were in high school?
- Did you feel any different from other children growing up because you were adopted?
- Did you feel like you were missing anything growing up because you

were adopted?

- How was it like to be the only Asian child in school?
- What were some challenges of going to school for you?
- Which times in school did you enjoy most?
- What did you do in order to make your school life easier?
- How would you evaluate your school experiences and memories as a Korean transracial child?

Community

- How would you describe the neighborhood you grew up?
- Do you remember any comments from outsiders about you and your family? How did you and your family react to such comments? How did those reactions change over time?
- How did the neighborhood and the community impact your life as a transracial adoptee?
- Where there things the community could have improved to support you as a transracial adoptee, or your transracial family?

Birth Family

- What did you know about your adoption background?
- Which information did you have about your birth family?
- What did you do in order to get more information about your background?
- Can you talk about your decision making process to come to Korea in order to find your birth parents?

Cultural Socialization and Identity

- Can you talk about memories related to any activities about Korean culture you participated?
- How did your parents inform/teach you about your ethnical background?
- Can you describe how your family participated in cultural traditions and celebrations?

Interview 2: Reflection on the meaning

Adoptive Family/ Birth Parents

- Can you talk about memories when your adoptive family was especially supportive and memories when the adoptive family's support was less helpful?
- How did the challenges and crisis you went through impact your family?
- What emotions come up when you think about your birth parents or

adoptive parents? Are there differences? Why? Why not?

- Which role played your birth parents in your life and how did that role change over time?
- Which family members, in the adoptive family and your birth family, do you perceive as your family?
- Can you talk about unanswered questions which bothered you over the life span?
- Which information about your background and your birth family would have been the most helpful for you?
- How did the existing memories and information about your birth family influence your life?

Adoptee's changes in their perception of self

- What support helped you most to get more information about your Korean background?
- Which factors in your life as a transracially adopted person were strongest and made you the person you are today?
- In times of challenges, what did you do? What supported you to overcome those challenges?
- What does it mean to be a transracially adopted person to you?
- Given what you have reconstructed in these interviews, where do you see yourself going in the future?

초록

1953년부터 현재까지 한국에서 태어난 약 20만명의 아이들이 외국으로 입양되었다. 하지만 새로운 언어와 낯선 문화 속에서의 성장과정을 입양아의 관점에서 살펴 본 학술적인 연구가 많지 않다. 특히 미국에서 자란 한국인 입양아들에게 초점을 맞춘 연구에 비하여 유럽 에서 성장한 한국인 입양아에 대한 연구는 매우 부족한 실정이다. 따라서 본 연구의 목적은 자신의 출생 가족을 찾기 위해 유럽에서 한국에 온 세 명의 한국인 입양아들에 대한 이야기를 통해 유럽에서의 성장경험과 한국에서의 생활경험에 대한 의미를 상실감과 소속감의 측면에서 생각해 보는 것이다. 유럽의 한국인 입양아들에 대한 보다 깊은 통찰을 위해 다음과 같은 연구 문제를 제시한다.

1) 유럽에서 한국으로의 여정에서 한국인 입양아들이 가진 자기 자신에 대한 이해는 어떠한가?

2) 한국인 입양아들이 어린 시절부터 성인기까지 경험한 상실감은 그들에게 어떠한 의미를 지니는가?

3) 한국인 입양아들에게 소속감의 결핍은 자신의 정체성 형성 과정에서 어떠한 의미를 지니는가?

본 연구에서는 이와 같은 연구문제에 답하기 위해서 한국인

입양아들의 가족생활, 학교경험, 출생 가족 찾기, 생애 전반에 걸친 정체성 발달에 초점을 둔 42개의 개방형 질문을 구성하고, 이에 대한 심층 면담을 진행하였다. 세 명의 연구참여자들은 두 번에 걸친 면담을 통해 자신의 삶에 대한 이야기를 서술하였다. 면담 내용을 전사한 후, 세 연구참여자들 사이에 공유된 경험 및 각각의 고유한 경험을 분석하였다. 유럽에서 한국으로의 여정에서 계속된 주제는 지속되는 상실감의 경험과 소속감의 결핍이었다. 상실감과 소속감 결핍은 시간이 지남에 따라 변화하였다. 연구참여자 모두는 그들의 여정에서 적극적인 삶의 주체(active agents)였으며, 자신의 여정을 통해 상황을 개선해가며 새롭게 나타나는 문제들에 적응해갔다.

키워드: 한국인 입양아, 상실감, 소속감, 정체감, 유럽에서 한국으로의 여정